

Indian Values in Oc Eo Culture Case Study – Go Thap, Dong Thap Province

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Abstract

Oc Eo is one of the ancient cultures in the Southern part of Vietnam, which belonged to the ancient Funan Kingdom. The ancient Funan was the earliest nation formed and developed in Southeast Asia between the 1st and 7th century AD. In its heyday, the Kingdom was highly developed in terms of society, economy, and great military power. Oc Eo port was considered as an important international market and also one of the centers of culture and commerce of Funan. When considering Funan, it was Oc Eo that was mostly mentioned, the economy and culture of Oc Eo reflected that of Funan. What belongs to this culture now is only in the form of antiques, artifacts and monuments scattering throughout the lands in southern Vietnam such as An Giang, Kien Giang, Tien Giang, Dong Nai, Long An and Tay Ninh province, etc. particularly Dong Thap which is known for the historical site and relics of Go Thap which bear all the imprints of India such as Go Minh Su, the Sun God temple, Shiva temple, Vishnu temple, God Pond, God sculptures, golden Buddha, stone, wood, and reliefs. Each single relic and artifact in Go Thap contains cultural and religious values of India. Currently, the historical site of Go Thap which has been excavated by well-known archaeologists both national and international is ranked as the special National Monument. Therefore, the aim of this article is to elucidate the influence of Indian culture on that of Oc Eo, namely the culture of Go Thap in terms of religious beliefs, architectural shrines, god sculptures, and reliefs. There were a number of excavations in 1980s and 1990s at Go Thap Site in Mekong Delta region by archaeologists in Vietnam. They unearthed many brick architectures and relics which were considered to be belonged to Oc Eo culture. For me, they reflect the imprints of Indian culture, namely Indian religion i.e. Buddhism and Hinduism, Indian architecture and sculpture.

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In this article, I will prove that the religious, architectural and sculptural vestiges in Go Thap site bear Indian values by studying round and reliefs sculpture, relics and architecture remained in Go Thap and basing on the findings of eminent scholars and experts in this field both national and international such as Prof. Dr.Dang Van Thang, Dr.Le Thi Lien, Le Xuan Diem, Dao Linh Con, Parmentier.H and Anna Aleksandra Slaczka.

Keywords: Indian values; Oc Eo culture; Go Thap; Dong Thap.

1. Introduction

The ancient Funan Kingdom was the earliest nation formed and developed in Southeast Asia between the 1st and 7th century AD. Its heyday had been around between the 4th and 6th centuries AD, the Kingdom was highly developed in terms of society, economy and great military power, which made it become Funan Empire. Oc Eo port was considered as an important international market port and also one of the centers of culture and commerce of Funan. When considering Funan, it was Oc Eo that was mostly mentioned, the economy and culture of Oc Eo reflected that of Funan. All of the agricultural and industrial products, handicraft of Gupta dynasties were brought to Funan from various parts of India such as from Bengal Bay, Krishna River, and Gange River. Hinduism, Mahayanism, Hinayanism and Jainism were spread and popularized by Indian merchants travelling to Funan. Oc Eo port was considered as an important place which received Indian cultures and civilization. The architecture, the ancient statues, brick artifacts, clay relics, glass relics, metal furniture, and iron tools excavated in the province of Kien Giang, An Giang, Dong Thap, Can Tho, and Long An were the evidence that there had been economic and cultural exchanges between the dynasties in India with Funan Kingdom. On the other hand, Oc Eo civilization was considered as one of the brilliant civilizations in Southeast Asia due to close ties with the Gupta dynasties, India. It is believed that the heyday of the Gupta Dynasty had a huge influence on the golden age of the ancient Funan Kingdom, which was shown in the political institutions. The economy reflected trade exchange between the two Kingdoms. Indian cultures were reflected in the form of religious beliefs, architecture, and sculptures. In particular, Funan sculptures had been influenced by Gandhara, Mathura, Amaravati, and Gupta styles in the form of the round sculpture, reliefs, and other small objects. Funan literature was profoundly influenced by Buddhist and Hindu teachings. Sanskrit, an ancient language of India, which was very popular in the Gupta dynasty, was found in Funan. This means there was a huge influence of former on the latter. Oc Eo played an important role in maritime trade in Southeast Asia, and in the political economic and cultural relations, between Indian dynasties and Funan Kingdom. It also played an important part in the development and prosperity of the two countries in particular and Southeast Asia in general.

Regarding Go Thap studies, there have been several articles and studies of eminent scholars and researchers. First, Anna Leksandra Slaczka wrote an article published on journal.lib.washington.edu on the brick structures of Go Thap, in which the author imposed a question whether they are tomes or temples. The author tried to prove that the bricks structures of GoThap were temples by comparing Go Thap's relics, especially gold leaves with those found in Southeast Asia. The author's findings would help to prove that they bear some exogenous features from India. Second, Dang Van Thang, an expert in archaeology studied on Minh Su temple at Go Thap through excavation published in the book named "Oc Eo Culture – New Discoveries". His article would lay the foundation for further studies. He also proved that Go Thap used to be a religious center of Oc Eo, Funan. Third,

Dr. Phan Dong Thien presented a paper called Imprints of Mahayana Buddhism in Southeast Asian Countries' Culture and Arts at international conference held at university of Social Sciences and Humanities Ho Chi Minh City in 2013, which claimed that Mahayana spread over Southeast Asia region including Oc Eo. Finally, Le Thi Lien has published a book on Buddhist Arts in Mekong Delta before 10th Century, based on which we can find Indian values at Oc Eo, especially Go Thap – Dong Thap.

2. Case study - Go Thap (Dong Thap province)

Belonging to Tan Kieu commune, Go Thap which is 10.7km North from Thap Muoi District, and 43km North East from Cao Lanh city used to belong to Thap Muoi hamlet, My Tho, Nam Phong, Sa Dec province. Go Thap is known for the ruins with a planning area of 300 hecta; Dong Thap authorities have issued conservation policies to preserve this area. Go Thap, one of the historical sites of the Oc Eo culture which is known as Prasat Pream Lovén, was uncovered by the French archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century. Since then, Go Thap has become the great interest to archeologists both national and international. The experts have found traces of relics, artifacts, architectural monuments, relics of residence of the Oc Eo culture. It is evident that Go Thap has great spiritual and material values and is considered as a historical and cultural site in Vietnam. In addition, Go Thap is recognized as one of 34 national historical sites in Vietnam.

2.1. The Value of Indian Religion at Go Thap

Religion has played an extremely important role in the spiritual life of Indian people. It can be said that religion in India is an influential and deeply dominant factor on cultures and all aspects of life and society of the Indian people from ideas, beliefs, rituals, traditions, custom to literature, architecture and sculpture, music, painting, theater, etc. India is named as the "land of religions" by researchers because it is the cradle of one of the world's major religions including Buddhism. In addition, all the major religions of humanity are found there, such as Christianity, Islam alongside indigenous religions like Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and other religions such as Judaism, Zoroastrian and folk beliefs such as worshiping River God, Mountain God, thunder God (Indra), animals and especially the Sun God (Surya). Sun God is worshiped by many agricultural nations in the world. For instance, the sun is the symbol of Japan's emblem and the country's national identity. In Cambodia, Baladitya (meaning sun) was known as the name of the ancestor of Angkor dynasties. In the belief of the Egyptians, Sun Ra God was the father of the Egyptians' gods. In the book "A Brief History of Ancient World – Medieval – Modern - Contemporary" by Tran Giang Son who compiled and wrote that Amenhotep IV Akhenaton was the king of the 18th dynasty of ancient Egypt. The 18th Dynasty (1570-1323 BC) was the most prosperous period of ancient Egypt. Akhenaton's favorite local god of Heliopolis was Aton (Sun God) and worshiped Aton as the supreme deity of the country. The king ordered that all people must worship god Aton and changed his name from Amenhotep (who loves Amon) into Akhenaton (light of Aton) and claimed to be the son of the god Aton [1]. Both the Incas in South America from the 13th to 16th century AD, also claimed their ancestors to be the descendants Sun God - the god Inti and considered the worship of the Sun god was an obligation of the Inca people [2]. In traditions of the Vietnamese people, the worship of God began from the Hung Vuong ages, with evidence remaining from symbols on drums. It is the star with lots of wings, usually twelve sides, embossed on the drum surface. However, when mentioning sun god, we think of sun god worship

as a religious ritual in India because it is pretty popular in the country of the “land of religions.”

In Hindu mythology, sun god worshipping emerged from the period of Veda, particularly in Rig - Veda: “At aloft, his rays illuminate the gods, he knows all the animals have been born out, thus all of them can direct toward the sun god”[3]. Vedas, written about belief systems of India, worshiped the sun as the place reserving endless energy and radiance. The sun god is called Surya or Aditya having arms and golden hair, riding on the sunrise cart by seven female horses. Like Helios god of Greece, Surya is the son of the sky goddess Aditi and Dyaus god, the god of light in the sky. Surya is a king with his own capital, which is the city of the sun Vivsvati meaning “the owner of the sun's rays.” Surya is also known under the name Dina-Kara, meaning that people make day and Karma - Sakshi, which means “witness of good works” [4]. Therefore, the worship of Surya is very popular in India. Moreover, the worship of the sun god is found in many “Puranas.” Ramayana epic wrote that Rama began worshipping the sun god through Aditya Hridaya Mantra. Varahamirhira, the famous astronomer, mathematician and astrologer also wrote the reference for complex rituals and symbols of the Sun god. Mayura, living at the beginning of the millennium I had compiled Surya Satakam, praised god Surya, which emphasized the ability to cure blindness of the God [5].

2.1.1. Cult of the Sun God (Surya) at Go Thap

At Go Thap, the archaeologist Prof. Dr. Dang Van Thang has revealed and proved that hole No. 11 (10GT.H11) was Sun God Temple. According to him, “in the heart of hole 11, just below a depth of 0.2m, stones found to be arranged in a circle. It's a sign of the sun god temple in a few places in the world. Below this circle created on narrowing funnel shape and at the bottom, at a depth of 1.37m, 2 gold pieces were found: one piece with sun circle with 8 rays or the spokes of the wheel Sun and other piece shaped sun rays. The picture of sun / sun wheel of gold found in hole 11 is quite similar to the stone wheel in temple of Sun God at Konarak, Orissa in India that was built by King Narasimhadeva (1236 -1264) with sandstone in the year around 1240. It can be said, finding the stone circle section above and finding 8 sun rays / wheel with 8 spokes gold below, showing hole 11 was the Sun god (Surya) temple”. In addition, the artifacts considered to be a symbol of the sun god were found, including the round statues, sculpture, paintings of Surya in many different states, 8-round-wing-model, and architecture of circle or semi-circle, lakes built around the temple. In particular, a Surya stone statue found at this ruins is now kept at the Museum of History in Ho Chi Minh City with registration number BTLS 5499, dating from the fifth century [9: 102-103]. The findings of archaeologists have confirmed the existence of the Sun god worship at Go Thap site.

2.1.2. Buddhism's Values at Go Thap

Despite not finding Buddhist architecture at Go Thap, archaeologists unearthed many traces of this religion in the later phase, either iconic worshipping or Mahayana Buddhism stage. Mahayana period took place in India in the 3rd century BC to the 1st century AD, at Mauryas-Sungas dynasty and had developed in Kushanas, Satavahanas and Gupta dynasties. The appearance of Mahayana Buddhism was seen as a revolution in thought and culture of ancient India. We can say that the thought and practice of Mahayana have significant impacts on philosophy, psychology, literature, art and architecture as well as sculpture of India. Before the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, India did not have any idols or statues at all. All architectures, sculptures, paintings of India were the first products of Mahayana.

Accordingly, iconology, vegetarian offerings as well as temples, Hindu caves were influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism was born and received patronage from the reigns such as Mauryas, Kushanas, Satavahanas and Guptas. Therefore, Mahayana flourished not only in India but also spreading to other Asian countries. In particular, the mark of Mahayana Buddhism had a profound influence in Southeast Asia. Through archaeological evidences, all temples, towers, images, and painting in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, China, Vietnam, etc. are derived from Indian Mahayana Buddhism [7:125].

According to archaeologist Prof. Dr. Dang Van Thang, besides worshipping the Hindu gods, Go Thap residents still believed in Buddhism. Among the vestiges of discovered architectures which could not be determined to be built by Buddhists, the large number of Buddha statues were found here, including even the landmark "Buddha lake", suggesting there was a time in addition to Hindu temples, Buddhist architectures used to be there majestically receiving followers to the ceremony. Supporting this hypothesis, archaeologist Dr. Le Thi Lien said that "under the current known resources, there were about 28 wooden statues of Buddha and his hands, among which, 22 objects and debris were unearthed at Go Thap. However, some due to being lost or damaged could not be studied in detail. Based on photographic documentation and some new artifacts discovered there are three groups determined based on their position [6: 42]. The wooden statue of Buddha at the Go Thap is shown in standing strong deviation to the right side (tribhanga), offset slightly hip (Abhanga) and an upright position (Samabhanga). Also, terracotta Buddha was also found in Go Thap (one object) [6: 47-48]. The archaeologists have identified the date of the Buddhawooden statues at Go Thap by using C14 method. Thereby, the Buddha statues here dated from the 2nd-3rd century AD, the 4th - 5th and the 6th - 8th centuries AD, in accordance with the period of Indian iconology.

Dating of three wooden statues by Southern Research Center of Archaeology performing in 2007:

Table 1: Date of Three Wooden Statues Performed by Southern Research Center of Archaeology in 2007

Registered No.	C14	Correspond Century
BTĐT.1246/ĐM.365	1800 ± 100 AD = 150 ± 150 AD	2 nd – 3 rd century AD
BTĐT.1249/ĐM.367	1530 ± 70 AD = 420 ± 70 AD	4 th – 5 th century AD
BTĐT.1250/ĐM.367	1250 ± 70 AD = 700 ± 70 AD	7 th - 8 th century AD

These analyses were conducted at the Ho Chi Minh City Center for Nuclear, showing three different dates with large amplitude, from the 2nd to 8th century AD. Many Buddha statues with various materials, especially wood found in Go Thap at various times show that Mahayanism used to exist in here or at least Go Thap residents were affected by this religion either indirectly or directly.

2.1.3. Hinduism's Values at Go Thap (Vaishnavism and Shaivism)

In Funan Kingdom, religious beliefs expressed a development process of perceiving the world, the universe, the outlook on life, conceptions of life and death, as well as notions of beauty, etc. Traditional beliefs believed that there was a metaphysical world of the spirits. According to Prof. Dr. Dang Van Thang, originally Funan residents worshiped sun god, this belief was represented by a temple of sun god at Go Thap (Dong Thap), which was expressed in the gold leaves, on round sculptured objects and on the terra-cotta pottery. Also, the art of tiles in the very special architecture, the tiles were classified into an eight wing rosette. The custom of worshiping the sun god had the notion that "the sun is the head quarter of the planet, capable of protecting the whole world." Besides Funanese deeply believed in the supernatural power of the spell, they created many types of amulet worn with the notion that material and images on the amulet could help wearers with supernatural powers to fight against the power of the devil. Objects of amulet were found in the ruins of Funan Kingdom. Subjects engraved on talismans were also very rich including cow, oxen, elephants, trident, snails, tortoises, etc., each symbol on the amulet contains a holy meaning. Later, folk beliefs can coexist with religion, two major religions including Buddhism and Hinduism spread in Funan and flourished there, especially Mahayana and two Hindu sects i.e. Vaishnavism and Shaivism. According to historical documents of Southern Qi, under the reign of Emperor Wu Ti (Wou-Ti), around 483-494 AD, writing about Kaundinya-Jayavarman as follows, "He was considered the strongest king ... He worshiped Buddhism although Brahmanism, especially Shaivism sect, still much influenced in Funan, continuing to worship Mahecevara that majesty reigns atop Mount MO-TAN... all vassals enjoyed his benevolence and all people living in peace. Thoughts of this religious philosophy were instilled and ingrained in the minds of people of all classes, from the king to the craftsmen and farmers. They made the thought of Hinduism on their art works from round sculptured objects, reliefs to small metal objects, terracotta, especially on the gold leaves. The architectures of Hindu ideology were very popular in Funan Kingdom. In Go Thap, Dong Thap, archaeologists discovered more than ten architectures of this religion. Architecture in Go Thap was supposed to be of Vishnu temple with round objects, reliefs and sculpture of Vishnu was found. The other architecture was considered representing Shiva temple because of symbols of this sect such as lingam, yoni, linga-yoni discovered in the ruins. Architectures of Hinduism especially Vaishnavism and Shaivism and the sun god found in Go Thap clearly demonstrated the value of Indian Hinduism present here and played a part in religious life of Go Thap residents.

2.2. The Value of Indian Architecture in Temples of Go Thap

The ancient architecture of Funan such as temples, houses, palaces, fortes were the typical Southern architecture and the background for the development of the Oc Eo culture in the first 10 centuries AD.

Funan architecture has been a great interest to national and international scholars since the nineteenth century. There have been many excavations by the Western and Vietnamese archaeologists, particularly those who come from the Southern Institute of Social Sciences and the University of social Sciences and Humanities -Vietnam National University HCMC."[8:9]. The distinguished natural and geographical characteristics reflect the architecture and features of each particular region. However, the architectural monuments of Funan today are only a part of the ancient architecture. The remaining had been destroyed. While studying the ancient architecture in India and Southeast Asia, H. Parmentier exclaimed "we could only study what is visible but there

is very little left. It is its art form that can be recognized through the traces...only constructions of heavy materials can exist over time”.

Amongst the resident ruins in Oc Eo, the wooden architecture is popular with hundreds of wooden pillars which are supposed to be the leftovers of piles in the shapes of circles, squares, rectangular, octagonal. These wooden structures were largely destroyed. What have been left are traces of them. The wooden material in the complex architecture (stone, brick, and wood) at the monuments such as Go Nam Tuoc, Go Cay Gao, Go Ong Tung, etc. was seriously damaged. It could be identified through the traces only. The stone and brick architectural monuments built on the high hills or mountainous areas such as Go Cay Thi, Go Thap, Go Minh Su are still intact. These are stone, brick, rank door, doorway, canopy door, stone pillars, tiles, ceramics, God statues, objects of worship, wells, God ponds, etc.

In addition to the existing architecture in the form of ruins or traces, there are three intact temples of Funan architecture such as Chot Mat (Tay Ninh), Binh Thanh (Tay Ninh) and Vinh Hung (Bac Lieu). Funan architecture represented the development of science and technology and the art of construction between the 1st and 12th centuries AD. In the early stage (pre-Oc Eo), structures of houses, common houses and temples were that of light architectures. These buildings were built with different materials such as bamboo, wood and leaves. During the developed stage (Oc Eo and post-Oc Eo), heavy architectures emerged in the form of stone, brick, and wood. The Funan architectural monuments could be classified into three categories: low plain, ancient alluvia land coastal sand dunes. They came into various shapes such as square, or rectangular with the front corner cracking, rear corner cracking, or a combination of all of these factors. Funan architecture could also be found in two forms: with roofs and without roofs. Structures without high walls like ancient temples were in cubicles where pieces of gold and God statues were placed. In the developed period, roof architecture and temples were quite popular in Funan namely Go Thap (Dong Thap), Go Cay Thi (An Giang), Linh Son Temple (An Giang), etc. They are part of the complex consisting of many ancient temples appeared around the 5th – 6th centuries AD.

Go Thap architecture in Tan Kieu, Thap Muoi district, Dong Thap province, located at 10°36'06" north latitude, 105°49'55" east longitude, is the main and highest in Go Thap with the height of 3,80m above the sea level. It is about 4,500 m². Go Thap's east-west length is 17,30m and north-south width is 12m. Go Thap sites reveal many great architectural stones and ancient bricks in the shape of linga which enable the archaeologists to come up with a conclusion that Go Thap is a type of roof structure.

In addition, there is also Linh Mieu Ba or Ba Chua Xu Temple which has brick foundation of 20,9m long located in the east-west and is 575m from Go Thap. It has a rectangular shape with about 3,500 m² acre, and the top is of 3.6m above sea level and 1.5 m high above the field ground. The structural plan has 14 angles and 24 edges with different sizes. The longest side is 12m (north-south edge), the shortest edge is 5.6m (the eastern side). The ground was built on the chess board squares. Around foundation, there are traces of the fake pillars, If archaeologists' assumption were correct, Ba Chua Xu Temple would be of Funan architecture. Go Minh Su is also of the roof architecture. It is located between Go and Ba Chua Su Temple, which is 10°36'22.55 north latitude and 105°49'48.32 east longitude. It is 7,01m above sea level. It has square shape which is high in the

center and lower down the side. These elements are evidence of Funan roof structure [9].



Figure 1: Go Thap Site



Figure 2: Minh Su Architecture



Figure 3: Brick Structure at Go Thap

2.3. Indian Sculptural Values at Go Thap

The art of sculpture on wood was special to Go Thap culture. The main motifs were religious, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. Sakyamuni, Hindu gods like Shiva, Vishnu, Surya and other holy objects including linga, yoni, linga-yoni, wheel, etc were engraved on wood or sandstone beautifully.

There are many schools of sculpture on wood that are unique in Go Thap. A number of wooden Buddha sculptures were found in here, including twenty eight sculptures and two Buddha's hands. Buddha sculptures almost stand in a lotus platform. There is unisa on the head, the face is quite crooked, chin is not jutting, lips are noticeable but not thick, earloppes are long, chest is widened, hip is thin, legs are straight and clear. The Buddha has firm muscles with the drapery of heavy pleats which covers almost the entire figure of the Great Master. This style belongs to Gandhara school of India. Other sculpture has other standing position such as Abhanga. The Buddha stands in abhangan position on a lotus platform. The cults of hair in jatamukuta are more pronounced. The face is angular and chin is round, eyes looking down, nose is sharp and better defined, the mouth small, the right hand is broken, the left hand raises at the hip, the drapery covers the body partially only on the left shoulder. This style belongs to Mathura school of India. In addition, archaeologist L. Malleret unearthed in Funan sites four wooden Buddha sculptures in 1944, in which one sculpture in Go Thap, one in Phong My and other two in Binh Hoa and claimed that they were dated back in the 4th century AD. Since 1975, archaeologists discovered fifteen sculptures and one hand of Buddha in Go Thap, Giong Xoai (Oc Eo), Vinh Hung, Nhon Thanh. These sculptures show characteristics of Indian school of art i.e. Mathura and Amaravati in which they stand on a lotus platform, the drapery covers only the left shoulder, and it lengthens up to the feet. Finding these wooden Buddha sculptures bearing Indian school of art shows the cultural exchanges between India and Funan Kingdom in the past. In addition to wooden Buddha sculptures which were skillfully engraved, Hinduism's sculptures were found such as sculptures of Vishnu, Surya and even yaksha and yakshi at Go Thap. This shows that Go Thap residents were deeply influenced by Indian religions, which is manifested in their art of sculpture bearing characteristics of Indian schools of art.



Figure 4: Wooden Buddha, Go Thap



Figure 5: Wooden Buddha, Go Thap

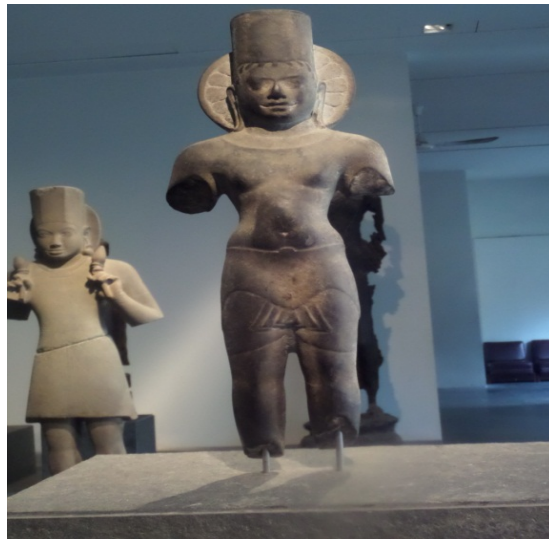


Figure 6: Surya God, Go Thap



Figure 7: Vishnu God, Go Thap

3. Conclusion

Through studies, I found that Go Thap's brick structures, sculptures and remained relics reflect Indian values. Some scholars said that they belong to Oc Eo culture.

Some prove that they show several Indian features. However, whether they are indigenous and endogenous or exogenous needs to be studied further.

The reasons why Indian imprints are present at Go Thap are not known. Therefore, more studies in Go Thap should be carried out in near future.

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Appendix

Table 1: Inscription on gold leaves

Symbols	Registered Number	Quantity
Chakra	93GT.M1.16	1
Varaha	93GT.M1.3	3
Kurma	93GT.M1.5	3
Matcha	93GT.M1.11	1
Vajra	93GT.M1.13	1

Table 2: Gold objects in storehouse of Dong Thap Museum

Symbols	Registered Number	Quantity
Vishnu	93GT.M4.1	2
Chakra	93GT.M4.3	3
Chakra	93GT.M5.1	12
Sankha	93GT.M5.10	7
Lotus	93GT.M5.18	5
Garuda	93GT.M5.23	1
Nadin	93GT.M5. 25	1
Matcha	93GT.M5.28	2